

Parshat Vaera
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25 Tevet 5785

This past Tuesday, January 21, an interfaith Service of Prayer for the Nation was held at the Washington National Cathedral. Unlike in years past, this service, in the words of the cathedral, was not “for any politician or political party, but designed to pray for unity, reconciliation and bridge-building in our divided nation.” The Right Reverend Mariann Budde, the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, became an overnight internet celebrity when the final two minutes of her sermon went viral. I expect many have seen it, but if you haven’t, the clip finds Reverend Budde making “a final plea,” directly to the newly inaugurated president. She looks up from the dais, gentle but firm in tone, and addresses the men in the front row:

“In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now...I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away; and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands, to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us to be merciful to the stranger, for we were all once strangers in this land.”

In her list of those fearful, the Reverend specifically includes LGBTQ children in Democrat, Republican, and Independent homes, as well as immigrants who are our neighbors, friends, co-workers, employees; the hard working folks whose labor often goes unseen. This listing of the vulnerable of course echoes the mandate of our own tradition to protect the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.

These brave two minutes were lifted out of a longer sermon about unity. Though Reverend Budde names the obvious challenges unity presents in our current political moment, noting that the loss of this election for some is about the loss of equality, dignity, and livelihood, still; she hopefully offers us three ingredients she deems necessary to achieve a basic, sacred human unity: respect for the dignity of every human being, honesty, and humility. In other words: *tzelem elokim*, *emet*, and *anavah*. While I believe the president struggles with *each* of these core values, Reverend Budde chooses only to address him with her plea for *mercy*.

Each of us, no matter our station, can embody the three values Reverend Budde lays out. I needn’t have any power to see the Divine Spark in every human I encounter, to seek the truth and tell it, or to walk humbly with Hashem. But mercy; mercy is an attribute that can only be employed by someone with power over another. Mercy is what keeps someone in power from harming another, from humiliating them, from taking their life.

In the opening *pasuk* of our parsha, God reveals Godself to Moshe as Mercy:

וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי ה'
 (using the ineffable four-letter name of God)

Of God's many names, *elokim* and *yud-key-vav-key* represent two Divine attributes in a constant balancing game: *din/justice* and *rachamim/mercy*. In this moment of suffering, God is showing up as the God of mercy, the God who will finally make good on the promises made to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

וַאֲרָא אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אֶל-יִצְחָק וְאֶל-יַעֲקֹב בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וְשְׁמִי ה' לֹא נִודַעְתִּי לָהֶם:
I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My True name

They didn't really know me in all of my power; while I held back my mercy from them, I will give it in abundance now, to you Moshe, and to all of Bnai Yisrael through the display of my wonders. Calling on earlier midrashim, the 17th century work of mussar, *Shnei Luchot haBrit*, teaches us that "All the miracles performed by God in Egypt which defied all known laws of nature, were invoked by the Ineffable four-lettered name *yud-key-vav-key* which symbolises God as *haya, hove, y'hiyeh*. The One who created the world from nothing and who is eternal. The name *elokim*, on the other hand, symbolises nature," the natural way of the world. Until now, God has not upended the laws of nature for humankind. God has yet to show the extent of God's power, nor the extent of God's mercy.

The *eser makot* are God's opportunity to show *Bnai Yisrael*, the Egyptian people, and Pharaoh a display of power, yes, but also a display of mercy. Throughout the first six plagues, a horrific powerplay ensues; God turns the Nile into Blood...and Pharaoh's heart is hardened, God sends frogs...and Pharaoh's heart is hardened, lice, locusts, pestilence, boils. Though Pharaoh moves to relent after plagues 2-6, each time he feels the pull of God's strings. Through the hardening of his heart, God is slowly teaching Pharaoh, the all powerful narcissist, how to *need* mercy.

"I could have killed you from the start," God says before bringing the seventh plague of hail. "Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power." But with God's power, *b'ezrat Hashem*, comes God's mercy. God issues a warning before the fiery hailstorm, assuring the Egyptians that any human or animal left outside will perish. When the storm is over, the skeptics dead and the faithful living, Pharaoh *finally*, uncharacteristically admits defeat:

חָטָאתִי הַפְּעָם / ה' הַצְדִּיק / וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי הָרָשָׁעִים:
I stand guilty this time. Hashem is in the right. And I and my people are the wicked ones.

Why now? Midrash Tanchuma asks of Pharaoh's sudden humility. He answers with a parable: When someone wants to fight with his companion and overcome him, he comes upon him suddenly, kills him, and takes everything he has. But the Holy Blessed

One said to Pharaoh: "order your livestock and everything you have in the open be brought under shelter."

In other words, Pharaoh needed to *experience* mercy to *give* mercy, to be broken before completely breaking us. As criminal justice activist Bryan Stevenson writes: "There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy." God needed to bring Pharaoh to this place of utter despair to help him understand the consequences of his power over an entire nation. And while there are three nightmarish plagues to go, perhaps this process slowly chips away at Pharaoh's hardened ego. It takes time, for those like Pharaoh.

So, how can *we* chip away at the egos of those who show no mercy, who roll their eyes and cruelly scoff at humble pleas for it? Though **none** of us has the power upend nature, to bring fiery hail or to split seas, **each** of us has the power to do at least three things - to recognize the dignity of every human being, to be honest, and to be humble; *tzelem elokim, emet, anavah*. When he struck the Egyptian to save the vulnerable slave, Moshe did so because he could so clearly see the divinity in his fellow suffering human. The Talmud teaches: *Moshe emet v'torato emet*. Moshe is true and his Torah is true. We'll read in sefer Bamidbar that Moshe was more humble than anyone on Earth.

So we must, like Moshe, be *merciless* in our pursuit of dignity, truth, and humility in the face of *merciless evil*. We must, like God, chip away at the hardened layers around their hearts. If we can embody this accessible power, perhaps we too will know God's mercy and God's miracles.